

Christmas 2012 New Issues, Part 1

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It's that time of year when postal administrations release their Christmas holiday issues. Here's a sampling.

Aland: Finnish artist Minna L. Immonen describes her sailing elf as "inspired by the sea, but the motif still has a Christ-massy accent." Aland also sells Christmas seals, raising funds for the Children's and Family Cancer Fund and the Aland Cancer Society. Immonen also designed the seals, with a variety of Scandinavian classic Christmas symbols.

Aruba: Local artist Stephanie Croes prepared the designs for Aruba's stamps this year. Christmas is both a religious holiday and a worldwide cultural and commercial phenomenon. Popular customs illustrated on the stamps include exchanging gifts, decorating Christmas trees (shown), sharing meals with family and friends—and, of course, waiting for Santa Claus to arrive.

Australia: Australia was the first country to issue Christmas stamps on a regular annual basis, starting in 1957. "Even with new digital forms of communications, Australians still enjoy sending their Christmas greetings through the post," said Rowan Howarth, Australia Post General Manager for Merchandise Services.

Australia's traditional Christmas stamps tell the story of the Adoration of the Magi: a wool and silk tapestry featuring three magi (or kings) offering their gifts to the Baby Jesus. Popular Christmas carols are illustrated on the festive themed stamps: Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas, Jingle Bells and Ding Dong Merrily on High. Australia Post offers a five-cent discount on Christmas cards, as long as they are standard card sizes, no larger than 130mm x 240mm.

Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean is administered by Australia, and although most of the population is Chinese, Australia Post issues Christmas-themed stamps for the island each year. Recently the Christmas Island issue has taken a humorous approach, playing on the island's name. This year Santa—aided by a Greater Frigatebird, a Green Turtle and Red Crabs—creates sculptures from the island's sand.

Austria: Artist Adolf Tuma designed Austria's stamp this year, selecting details of a seven-panel painting of various scenes from the life of Mary, Mother Anna and other holy women, part of the "Adoration of the Christ Child" scene in the Carinthian Sanctuary Assumption in St. Mary's Church. Dating in part to the 8th Century, the structure has been rebuilt and remodeled many times over the centuries.

It has become a tradition that a painting and writing of retired bishop of the Diocese of Innsbruck, Dr. Reinhold Stecher, be used for an Austrian Christmas stamp. For the sixth time, he reached for his brush and palette and created the evocative view of the small Romanesque St. George Church in the village of Kals am Grossglockner.

Brazil: In non-traditional stamps from Brazil, a sheetlet of two uses a mosaic-style image of the Holy Family. The halo of the baby Jesus shines golden rays pointing upward, which spread throughout the sheet, made of hot-stamped gold. "Christmas Peace" is the inscription. Two circular stamps complete the series. Santa, wearing a red suit with formal tails conducts a chorus of children from various ethnic groups, singing happily. A box of brightly wrapped gifts, obviously carefully delivered by the Brazilian post office, promises a happy holiday.

Canada: Canada Post caters to cookie lovers this year with holiday-themed stamps featuring various gingerbread cookies. A fourth design offers a more traditional approach with an image of the Madonna and Child from one of the more than 150-year-old stained glass windows at St. Mary's of the Immaculate Concept Cathedral in Kingston, Ontario. The PERMANENT gingerbread stamps are enhanced with augmented reality, which means once the free StampsAlive app for smartphone and tablet is downloaded, users can hover over the stamp with a mobile device to choose from several decorating scenarios.

Czech Republic: Personalized Christmas stamps from the Czech Republic use a decorated tree design that comes in sheets of nine stamps and 12 blank "coupons" which may be ordered with a design provided by the purchaser. Sheets are also available with a Christmas Carp on the coupon. Christmas Carp? The custom of raising carp for Christmas dinner goes back to at least the 17th Century. Carp was one of the first fish to be raised on farms, and today the Czech Republic exports nearly 20,000 tons of the fish all across Europe. No turkey dinner in Eastern Europe. Look for fried carp on the dinner table. Don't forget to save a Carp fish scale to dry and keep in your pocket. A scale from the Christmas carp is believed to bring good fortune for the upcoming year.

Faroe Islands: The Faroes post office continues its series of Christmas stamps devoted to popular Christmas carols. "Why is Everything so Cozy Tonight?" is a native carol, written around 1900 by newspaper editor Kristin i Geil. It is most commonly heard in a 1957 recording from a radio broadcast by siblings Karl and Elin Mouritsen. Not surprisingly, the song yearns for the sun and light in the midst of winter. Undoubtedly one of the world's most popular Christmas carols is "Silent Night," a German carol from 1818. It was translated into Faroese 1891 by Friorikur Petersen, who at that time was the vicar in Suouroy. He later held many religious and political posts.

